GOOD EVENING by Bill E. Burk

King Dramatization Contained Miscues

TELEVISION DRAMATIZATION OF the late Dr. Martin Luther King's civil rights movement was "good enough for entertainment, but I saw a lot of things that didn't exist and a lot of facts that were not in chronological order," says Ernest C. Withers, the Memphis photographer who was closely associated with King in the 1960s.

Withers, in fact, narrowly missed being at the Lorraine Motel at the time King was assassinated.

Withers

"I had been in federal court all day with Andrew Young and the Rev. James Lawson," said Withers. "Young was asking Judge (Robert) McRae for an injunction in the sanitation worker's strike. Rev. Lawson was to have taken him back to the Lorraine, but he was speaking at Southwestern that night and he asked me to take Andy back to the motel. When we got there, Andy asked me to get out and come in for awhile, but I was tired and I left. A few minutes later, Dr. King was killed."

Withers said the six-hour NBC-TV drama, "King," which was spread over three nights, did not point out that King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference was formed at the Mt. Olive CME Church in Memphis in 1957.

HE NOTED SEVERAL discrepancies of fact regarding the final segment of King's activities in Memphis:

1. The film showed, on King's arrival in Memphis, scenes of Army National Guardsmen lining the streets, when, in fact, the Army Guard was not activated until after King's assassination. (This writer was one of the thousands of Guardsmen activated in the hours following the assassination.)

2. The film showed two black firemen stationed near the Lorraine Motel. Both were mysteriously transferred the night before the assassination. "There was only one black fireman at that station," said Withers, "and that was Floyd Newman."

3. One scene showed a sanitation worker being quizzed, in King's presence, as to why he had pushed King during an earlier march in Memphis and the man replied he had been paid by the FBI to do so. Withers, who was with King during that march, said: "That's the first time I had heard that. No sanitation workers pushed or shoved Dr. King during that march."

4. Mrs. Coretta King was shown leaving Atlanta even before her husband was declared dead. In fact, Withers said, she was flown to Memphis the following morning in a chartered plane provided by then-U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy.

5. The film also showed a black man identified as Jerry inviting King to make that fatal trip to Memphis. (Presumably this was Jerry Wurf, a white labor leader involved in the strike.) "It was Rev. Lawson who persuaded Dr. King to come to Memphis," Withers said.

CHRONOLOGICAL SEQUENCES took a beating, as well, said Withers, who was one of the first 10 blacks to join the Memphis Police Department.

"They showed the talk between Dr. King and Malcolm X," noted Withers. "While the content was pretty accurate on that talk, it took place in Selma, Ala., and not Chicago as they showed it.

"And Mrs. Liuzzo (the Detroit white housewife) was shown being killed the night before the Selma march ended. She was killed the night after.

"The two Memphis sanitation workers shown killed accidentally on the job before Dr. King arrived, I feel certain, were killed after his death."

WITHERS WAS IN Montgomery, Ala., at the conclusion of the Selma march and spotted himself in one of the newsreel sequences on the TV film. There was also a character named "Withers" listed in the screen credits. The Memphis photographer said he had calls from all over the country wanting to know if the character was portraying him, "but I never saw the Withers character in the film and I don't know how I would have been in it."

Withers and others wondered aloud how singer Tony Bennett was selected for his appearance in the film when other performers, notably Peter, Paul and Mary, Harry Belafonte and Frank Sinatra were all much more active in the civil rights movement led by King.

ONE ODD NOTE not shown. Withers said that on King's arrival in Memphis, he was being taken to the motel from the airport. En route, the car stopped at a red light next to a vehicle driven by funeral director R.S. "Bubba" Lewis. King was introduced to Lewis at the intersection.

A couple of days later, it was Lewis who drove King's body back to the airport to be flown back to Atlanta.